# SUPPOSED APE-MAN OR "MISSING LINK" OF SOUTH AMERICA

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EVER SINCE DARWIN expounded his theory of evolution, man has engaged in a search for links between himself and the apes. Discoveries of fossil man-like apes or ape-like men have always created a stir, but today the excitement is rarely felt outside scientific circles. On the other hand, rumors or equivocal reports of a live ape-man or "missing link" tracked down in the wilds of Africa, Asia or South America arouses the interest of the entire world. Curiosity about man's relatives, usually wholesome but sometimes varied with prejudice, has made the public an easy target for charlatans, pseudoscientists, deluded travelers and explorers, and even forgers with "missing links" their stock in trade.

The most notorious hoax perpetrated on the public, and not a few anthropologists, was the Piltdown Man. This supposed ancestral species, the widely acclaimed Dawn Man, was discovered before World War I in a gravel bed in Piltdown Common, Sussex, England. The animal was represented by some human skull fragments and an ape-like lower jaw with two molar teeth. A number of authorities questioned the association of skull bones and lower jaw, but not until 1953 was it conclusively demonstrated that these bones and teeth were cunningly altered and cleverly planted where they would be conveniently "discovered." The skull fragments proved to be of modern man, the lower jaw and teeth those of a young orangutan. Some prompt results of the exposé were the rewriting of pertinent parts of text books and encyclopedias and quiet re-designings of exhibits on man's evolution in a number of natural history museums.

Among purported living ape men, the best known currently is the *abominable snowman*. This mysterious creature of the Himalayan snowfields has so far eluded capture. The *orang-pendek*, or ape man of Sumatra, is another example. The footprints, bits of hide, hair and other concrete evidence attributed to it turn out to have belonged to some common animal, most often the sun bear, orangutan or gibbon.

### "APE MAN" BUILD UP

The New World can also lay claim to a few bogus ape men of which the best known is based on a photograph of a dead spider monkey and the uncorroborated and successively garnished statements of an adventurer. The hoax was exposed 30 years ago and references to the animal have long been expunged from the family tree of man exhibited in the dignified Musée de l'Homme, or Museum of Man, in Paris. A recently published popular book on animal mythology entitled "On the Track of Unknown Animals" by Bernard Heuvelmans, revived the story of the South American "ape man"

De Loys' photograph of the "Ape Man" he allegedly discovered and killed in the virgin forests of the Colombian-Venezuelan boundary region. The animal is a female of the common spider monkey of northwestern South America.

with embellishments and background effects never thought of by the original promoters of the fraud. This pseudoscientific book inspired a second round of sensational newspaper and magazine stories built around copies of the original photograph of what, paradoxically, is so obviously a spider monkey that the wonder is how it can be foisted off as anything else.

The originator of the South American ape man story was François De Loys, a French, or perhaps Swiss, geologist, who prospected along the border of Colombia and Venezuela between the years 1917 and 1920. While encamped on the banks of the Tarra, a tributary of the Catatumbo River, De Loys heard a strange noise in the bordering forest. He hurried with several of his assistants toward the source of the sound and noted that it originated at some distance below the tops of the trees. Once in the forest the men were surprised by two raging animals charging toward them. Thinking they were being assaulted by bears, De Loys and his companions leapt for their guns and made ready to receive the attackers. The infuriated beasts rushed forward shouting, gesticulating and breaking and throwing branches at the men. The individual in front, a female, was shot on the spot, while the other, said to be a male, retreated and disappeared. The dead animal was taken to the border of the Tarra River, propped up on a crate in a life-like pose, and photographed. According to De Loys, the animal had no tail, stood 4 feet 5 inches (135 centimeters) high, and the number of teeth in its mouth was given as 32—the same as in man.

The story is vague in important details. Nothing is divulged of De Loys' antecedents or the precise nature of his mission in South America. De Loys never specified the day, the month, or even the year in which he made what he pretended was a most remarkable discovery. The action of the animals in breaking branches and throwing them, a frequently observed trait of spider monkeys, seems to have made a deep impression on De Loys. Nevertheless, he does not say the animals were actually moving through the trees, and he gives no reason to believe they were running on the ground. Indeed the connections made by De Loys between the time and place sequences of his actions and those of the animals are extremely misty. The subject of the photograph, however, cannot be denied—but it is posed from the wrong side for proving it has no tail. The number and kind of its teeth cannot be determined from the picture and, except for a wooden box of problematical dimensions, there is no familiar object such as a gun, a hat, or a person by which to gauge the real size of the animal.

### "SCIENCE" BROUGHT IN

Several unspecified years after his return to Europe, De Loys showed the photograph and told his story to a French anthropologist, Dr. Georges Montandon. Why De Loys kept the matter secret all this time is not explained. In any case, Dr. Montandon had developed a unique theory of several independent origins of man and anthropoid apes in different parts of the globe and was prone to find comfort and support in De Loys' account of the existence of a man-like ape in South America. Like De Loys before him, the anthropologist withheld knowledge of the find for a few years.

At last, in March 1929, at least 10 years after the events happened, Professor Montandon presented a paper before the members of the French Academy of Sciences detailing the discovery of the first New World anthropoid known to science, an animal, he declared, more human in appearance than any ape of the Old World. The anthropologist was careful to base his conclusions on the invisible characters—the great size, the tailessness, and the human dental formula. The beast was then dutifully given the technical name *Ameranthropoides loysi* in honor of the explorer, and its official description was published in the prestigious Comptes Rendus of the Academy. In justice to Montandon it must be recorded that the description is hedged with the avowed reservation that the anthropoid might, after all, prove to be only a large species of spider monkey.

Two months later, Dr. Montandon published another account in the more popular *Illustrated Scientific Review* of Paris. This time, the standing height of the beast was

raised to 157 centimeters, or nearly 9 inches more than when first described. Emboldened by public interest in the fanciful aspects of the South American primate, Montandon published still another version. Now the animals which supposedly attacked De Loys and his company are not moving in trees and breaking branches. They advance instead in erect posture, supporting themselves by seizing the shrubbery along their path.

A thin light was also shed on how De Loys may have counted the monkey's teeth. The skull was supposedly removed from the body and entrusted to the expeditionary cook for safe keeping. This dignitary, according to the story imprudently converted his precious charge into a salt cellar. It is difficult to understand how or why such a fragile, perishable, if not putrid, and unwiedly object as a monkey skull would be used for a salt dispenser. In any case the salt, according to the narrator, caused the skull to disintegrate, and the fragments of bone were forever lost to science.

The fantastic history of the supposed anthropoid ape was too exciting to be overlooked by foreign newspapers and magazines. François De Loys himself made capital of the find bearing his name by writing an article for the June 15, 1929, issue of the *Illustrated London News*.

### EXPERTS EXPOSE CLAIMS

In his account, captioned as the discovery of the ancestory of man on the American continent, De Loys accepted Montandon's exaggerated dimensions of the animal and, not to be outdone, ventured that the weight "guessed, it is true, without scales, was probably well over eight stone, or 112 pounds." Continuing in the same vein De Loys confided that his animal had "ground habits," but neglected to describe them. That the long arms, hooked fingers, grasping toes, and, particularly, the large opposable great toe of the animal shown in the photograph are telltale characters of a creature with decidedly arboreal habits seems to have escaped the notice of the geologist.

The claims made by Montandon and De Loys were almost immediately scotched by experts. The renowned British anthropologist, Sir Arthur Keith, who had been beguiled by the Piltdown hoax, made no mistake here. De Loys' animal, he declared, "belongs to the genus *Ateles;* in brief it is a spider-monkey, whether of a known species we cannot say owing to a lack of evidence." Dr. Angel Cabrera, the world's leading authority on the mammals of South America, scathingly rebuked both Montandon and De Loys for their zoological pretensions. At the same time he pointed out that even if the alleged anthropoid ape was as large as claimed, lacked a tail, and possessed 32 teeth, instead of the 36 normally present in American monkeys, it would still be either a spider monkey or some closely related species of the same family.

The famous primatologist, Ernest Hooten also identified the animal in the photograph as a spider monkey. In addition he had word from an acquaintance in South America that men who accompanied De Loys had testified that the animal shot and photographed was indeed a spider monkey.

### PROOF IN THE BAG

During the course of my early field work in northern Colombia I made a point of exploring the same Tarra river region visited by De Loys. The area is one of the wildest in South America. It is inhabited by a savage tribe of the Motilones Indians, but not any man-like apes. Spider monkeys, however, were abundant and I secured a large series for laboratory study. These monkeys agreed in everything from the thumbless hands to the triangular blaze on the forehead, with the photograph of *Ameranthropoides loysi*, a copy of which I carried with me. The animals proved to belong to a race of the common species of spider monkeys known technically as *Ateles belzebut hybridus*. The largest specimen I secured, a female, measured 21 inches from crown to base of tail. The largest spider monkey on record, also a female of the same species, measured 26 inches in combined head and body length.

How these dimensions compare with those of the animal photographed by De Loys is impossible to judge with accuracy. Standing height measurements such as those given by De Loys and Montandon for *Ameranthropoides loysi* are not reliable. It may be possible, however, to make a rough estimate of the size of the animal by using for a scale the box in the photograph. According to De Loys this was a petrol crate. If it was of the common sort used in northern South America it packed two 5 gallon cans and its height is not over 15 inches. The cans themselves are 13 inches high. The height of the monkey from seat to crown is 1.8 times the height of the box or 27 inches. This is the combined length of head, body and buttocks. Account must be taken of the fact that the head and feet of the animal are nearer the camera than the crate and, therefore, appear disproportionately larger in the photograph than they are in life. The adjusted dimensions for combined head and body length alone would probably be under 25 inches. It may be safe to conclude, therefore, that far from being a giant ape, *Ameranthropoides loysi* is not only a common spider monkey but is hardly an extremely large one.

From time to time our attention is called to expeditions being formed, or only planned, for the purpose of finding a real specimen of the ape man of northern South America. It is hoped that the information in this article may be of some help.

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